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The Body of Ambivalence:
The 'Alive, Yet Dead' Portrait in the Nineteenth Century*

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Abstract

This paper is particularly concerned with 'alive, yet dead' portraits in the nineteenth century and how these images can invite specific readings. Extraordinary about this type of portrait photography is that it shows the dead sitter as a living person. The evidence of deadly signs on the body is hidden in a body of ambivalence – a body which fluctuates between a status of life and death. By examining particular cases of 'alive, yet dead' portraits, this paper will analyse aspects of temporal arrangements, visible and invisible signs in the image and how the bodies of evidence and ambivalence are constructed.

The Body of Evidence

'PM or not?' is one of the frequently asked questions on the Thanatos Archive of early post-mortem and memorial photography.[1] The abbreviation stands for 'post-mortem' and refers to one of the first and most popular photographic genres of the mid nineteenth century: so-called 'post-mortem photography', practised within occidental mourning and memorial traditions. Today the term generally describes a photographic portrait of the dead which was commissioned by the bereaved and provided solace during mourning.[2]

Between the 1840s and the 1870s, photographers primarily offered two different ways of taking portrait photographs of the deceased.[3] The most widespread was the 'last sleep' portrait showing the deceased person apparently sleeping, corresponding to the Christian belief of peaceful and eternal rest. The 'alive, yet dead' portrait, on the other hand, depicts the

deceased, often in an upright position, with opened or closed eyes.[4] In both cases the photographer had the task of concealing any signs of death as far as possible.

The Thanatos community gives special interest to 'alive, yet dead' and 'last sleep' portraits that are difficult to distinguish from those of the living: portraits which do not show any evidence of death, such as distortions or obvious lethal wounds. It could be – in fact, it is likely – that there are images of living persons in the collection. Thus, the online community provides arguments whether the sitter is alive or not, literally hunting for signs of mortality on the sitter's body. This way of reading the image uses the structure of forensic analysis, wherein it is necessary to ascertain what I will call the 'body of evidence'. Although this expression designates the entirety of the concrete proofs of how the sitter died, in this connection I use the term literally: the body of evidence is the corpse itself. In the question 'PM or not?', there is a premise that there is only one way to read and understand the image selected from two binary, mutually exclusive alternatives. This way of reading is ahistorical, however. In fact, the question is more about what today's viewer may see in these images than about reconstructing a historical context.

Two questions immediately arise: was it crucial in the early times of photography to evidence the nature of the image? Do we truly need to ask 'is the sitter alive or dead'? I would argue that the distinction does not matter. As American cultural historian Alan Trachtenberg emphasised in his seminal book *Reading American Photography*, the meaning of an image and its given

category change in the course of time. Trachtenberg points out: '[The photographs] may seem to offer solid evidence that objects and people exist, but do they guarantee what such things *mean*? […] [W]hat an image shows depends on how and where and when, and by whom, it is seen [italics in the original].'[5]

Far more crucial is understanding how such images functioned in the occidental mourning and memorial traditions of the nineteenth century. In addition to this, I will show how the 'alive, yet dead' portrait generates for today's viewer an ambivalent reading, specifically when we know very little about the photograph's historical context. By begging the question of whether the portrayed person is dead or alive, the photographic portrait of the deceased invites an unreliable way of reading that relies on simple techniques and the staging of the dead as alive.

In order to examine the construction of the 'alive, yet dead' portrait, it is necessary to review the historical sources. As several written statements of the nineteenth century testify, photographers intended to generate an uncertain reading in the image. At the request of customers who desired a last portrait of the deceased as an apparently living sitter, photographers used strategies I shall refer to as 'the body of ambivalence', setting the deceased in a status between life and death. I consider the question of how the body of ambivalence is constructed, and how this may influence our perception, leading us to presume that there is a body of evidence.[6]

I will begin by charting the history and presenting the stakes at the heart of the 'alive, yet dead' portrait in the nineteenth century. Through the analysis of several case studies, I will show which various factors participate in challenging the beholder's perception in the 'alive, yet dead' portrait, focusing on the ambivalence inherent to the medium of photography – the illusion of an apparent immediacy to the subject presented – which calls the beholder's perception into question. In that regard I demonstrate that the arrangement of the body and the manipulation of the image also generate an ambivalent reaction in the beholder.

In order to get a closer reading of the images, I suggest applying Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart's method of analysing the photograph in terms of its materiality and social biography by understanding it 'as belonging in a continuing process of production, exchange, usage and meaning'.[7] This understanding is shaped by (1) 'the plasticity of the image itself, its chemistry, the paper it is printed on, the toning [and] the resulting surface variations'; and (2) 'the presentational forms', i.e. the format of the photograph and the context in which it has been presented.[8] I then conclusively investigate the technical strategies of mid-nineteenth-century Vienna photographer Albin Mutterer, who was well-known for his retouched portraits of the deceased. The analysis is based on a portrait of an editor called Reitmayer, currently thought to be an 'alive, yet dead' photograph. The case study aims at questioning the ambiguous written sources which are attached to the image but give rise to more questions than answers as to what, precisely, it depicts.

Picturing the Deceased in the Nineteenth Century

Taking private portraits of the deceased was a socially accepted and a widespread photographic practice in Europe and North America from 1840 up to the 1900s. Although they were popular, these portraits were meant as a final – sometimes as the sole – visual remembrance and were presented only in private, familiar circles and exposed to an intimate and privy gaze.[9] Portrait photography of the deceased is based on the custom of private mortuary portraiture that first emerged in Flanders in the late fifteenth century, which quickly spread through northern Europe and was also cultivated simultaneously with photography in the nineteenth century.[10] Although the mechanical medium claimed a new way of seeing, early photographic techniques followed long-established painterly patterns, imitating the patina of painting to the point where the photographic image disappeared behind the overpainting entirely.[11] Photography's success was also a consequence of the relatively low production cost; contrary to painting, it was affordable for working-class families. In order to achieve a successful portrait of the deceased, it was necessary for photographers to represent the lifeless body in such a way that the person seemed to be in a living and 'natural position'.[12]

The difficulty of the task was a recurring theme in photographic journals. As British photographer Joseph Hubert discussed in his 1887 article 'Can Photography Lie?', there was the 'necessity' of 'correcting' the sitter's cadaverous features or manipulating the photograph of the deceased, as the 'horrible truth' of death had to be concealed: the bereaved should remember

the deceased without being reminded of the facticity of death.[13] Displaying any distortion of the body would mean – according to Christian belief – that the deceased did not find peace, but instead would continue to suffer after death.[14]

In *The Photographic and Fine Art Journal* from 1855, an anonymous writer reports on a photo of a deceased boy who was photographed in a way that expressed freshness and vivacity:

> Life from the Dead. – We have been shown a daguerreotype likeness of a little boy, the son of Thomas Dorwin, taken after his decease, by Mr. Barnard, of the firm Barnard & Nichols. It has not the slightest expression of suffering, and nothing of that ghastliness and rigity [sic] of outline and feature which usually render likenesses taken in sickness or after death so painfully revolting as to make them decidedly undesirable. On the other hand it has all the freshness and vivacity of a picture from a living original – the sweet composure – the serene and happy look of childhood. Even the eyes, incredible as it may seem, are not expressionless, but so natural that no one would imagine it could be a post mortem [sic] execution. This is another triumph of this wonderful art. How sublime the thought that man, by a simple process, can constrain the light of heaven to catch and fix the fleeting shadow of life, even as it lingers upon the pallid features of death.
> Hail glorious light that thus can timely save
> The beauty of our loved ones from the grave![15]

This description testifies how crucial it was that the beholder saw the deceased as alive: the unknown writer praises the ambivalent perception of the photograph, observing the medium's capacity to level the boundaries between the deceased and the living and, thereby, to turn the fact of death into a fiction of life. Also noteworthy in this report is his use of the expression 'fleeting shadow': 'Secure the shadow 'ere the substance fade / Let Nature imitate what Nature made' was one of the most popular American advertising slogans of photography.[16] The advertisement is a memento mori, reminding

the customers not only to take a picture before life ends (''ere the substance fade'), but also to take a picture of their beloved deceased before they completely disappear.

The inventor of the carte de visite, André-Adolphe-Eugène Disdéri, who was famous for his portraits of well-known figures in Parisian high society, took pictures of the deceased, although not without a feeling of unease.[17] In his book *Renseignements photographiques*, Disdéri writes about his experience:

> Each time we were called to do a portrait after death, we dressed the deceased in the clothes he usually wore. We recommended leaving the eyes open; we sat him near a table, and waited seven or eight hours before proceeding. In this way we would seize the moment when the contractions of rigor mortis disappeared [and] we were able to reproduce the appearance of life. This is the only way to have a suitable portrait that does not remind the one to whom he is so beloved, the painful moment that took him away.[18]

In addition to staging the deceased sitter to appear alive, it was also important to render a resemblance. As Disdéri wrote, the time span for taking pictures was fixed, limited by the end of rigor mortis and the imminent putrefaction of the corpse.

According to Disdéri and the anonymous American writer, it was preferable to take pictures of the dead in an ambivalent posture in order that the bereaved could console themselves by seeing the deceased as if she/he were still alive. There were, however, photographers who followed these rules without attributing any illusionistic quality to the image. The American photographer Nathan G. Burgess, for instance, was an expert in taking portrait photographs of the dead. In an article entitled 'Taking Photographs after Death', Burgess

describes how the deceased should be staged and portrayed. Although he instructs the reader not to stage the body in a setting referring to death, such as a casket, he remarks that 'all likeness taken after death will of course only resemble the inanimate body, nor will there appear in the portrait anything like life itself'.[19] For Burgess, the cadaverous signs cannot be eliminated entirely, except in the case of little children, because, he suggests, they could smile peacefully and lifelike in the photograph.[20] Echoing Disdéri's statement about the importance of the resemblance, Burgess discusses how photographers struggled with the expression of the deceased because it was not possible to either control or influence their face. However, a few photographers focused on techniques to improve the facial expression since, 'This gave the portrait [of a deceased] its moral and spiritual dimension.'[21] As a comparison of the different statements shows, not all photographers agreed that the dead could be staged in a lifelike way. Nonetheless, dramatising the deceased as alive was viewed as important.

The Body of Ambivalence

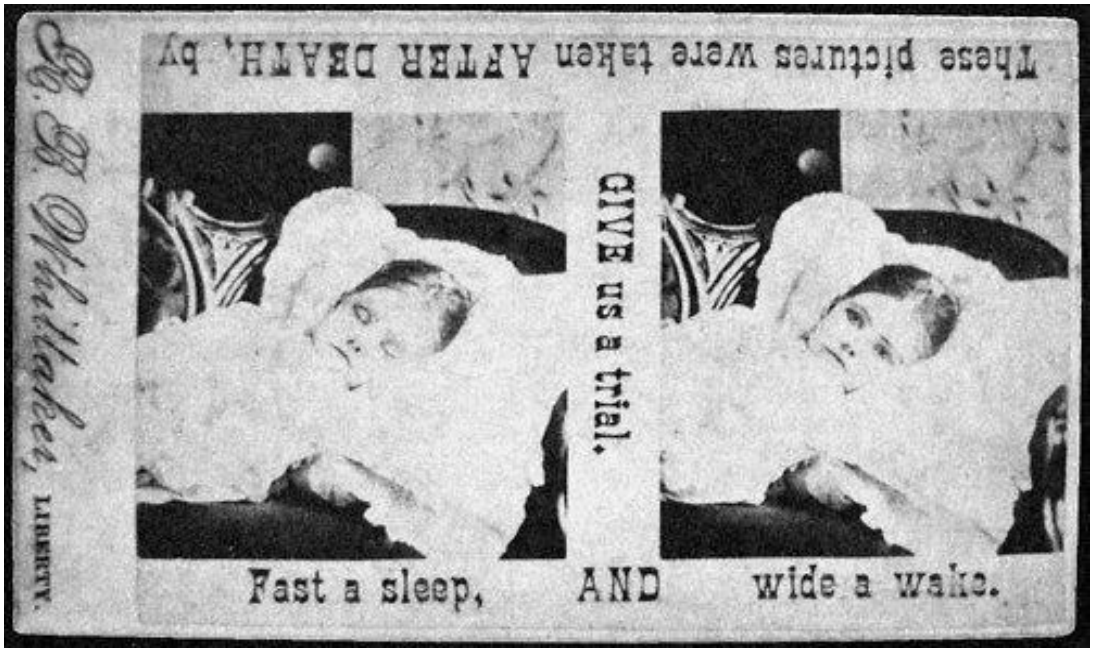

Fig. 1: R. B. Whittaker, Fast Asleep and Wide Awake, 1860s, retouched stereograph. From Stanley B. Burns, *Sleeping Beauty II: Grief, Bereavement and the Family in Memorial Photography* (New York: Burns Archive Press, 2002), n. p.

We have seen that the 'alive, yet dead' portrait depicts a deceased person in an everyday situation: the corpse is staged 'in a natural posture', with the eyes making a lifelike impression that imitates portraits of the living.[22] But it is not always necessary to stage the dead body in an upright position or with open eyes. A photograph by R. B. Whittaker, from Liberty, New York, shows two images of the same girl resting on a sofa and reclining on a pillow [fig. 1]. In the background there is wallpaper with a flower pattern. The anonymous girl is in some sort of domestic interior space, portrayed in two ways: in the first (left-side) image, her eyes are closed; in the second (right-side) image, she is looking directly at the viewer. Writing below the pictures suggests that the girl on the left is 'fast a sleep', whereas on the right side she is 'wide

awake'. The upside-down inscription, 'These pictures were taken AFTER DEATH', clarifies the nature of both photographs.

The format of the image reveals that this is a stereograph. However, a stereo card displays two almost identical images, each taken from a slightly different angle. With the aid of a stereoscope, the human eye merges the two images into one picture, which in turn is perceived as three-dimensional space. Although Whittaker's two photographs are not identical, both depicted initially the ostensibly deceased girl with her eyes closed. As a matter of fact, the photographer manipulated the right-side image by drawing in the girl's eyes. As a consequence of this trick, the stereograph does not realise a spatial and physical closeness to the child, but rather a temporal displacement that reverses the fact of death into the fiction of life. By making use of temporal displacement, Whittaker employs narrative as a stylistic device in the image, foregoing the illusion of three-dimensional space to create a before-and-after photo that, by reading the image from left to right, gives an impression of movement which coincides with a temporal dimension: the dead girl wakes from eternal sleep. Whittaker created an advertising gimmick by simply retouching the eyes with a pencil. The photograph is aimed at the customer, who must be convinced of Whittaker's artistic talent. The interaction of the viewer is important also because she/he is involved in this game of arranging the images into a sequence. At the same time, Whittaker creates a guessing game by asking whether the girl is alive or not, and in this way generates a body of ambivalence by means of a specific reading from left to right. However, the viewer is not supposed to uncover the manipulation by himself;

instead, it is the photographer who explains that the image has been manipulated, thus revealing the body of evidence and publicising his mastery of the artistic skills needed to create the illusion.

The American photographer's use of a stereograph to advertise his services is thoroughly inventive, but it was not extraordinary in the nineteenth century. Successful portrait photographs of the deceased were generally displayed in showcases of a photographer's studio.[23] Hence, the manner in which Whittaker staged the girl was not a particularly macabre way to advertise his services. On the contrary, this work testifies that such portraits were common and in great demand in the mid nineteenth century.

For our second example, let us turn to the French photographer A. Poton, who also employed the stylistic device of temporal shifts. A portrait taken in 1852 shows an elderly woman in a mountain landscape under the crescent moonlight [fig. 2]. On her lap lies a book, in which she has stuck her left thumb. She has closed her eyes, which may indicate inner reflection amidst nature. The woman's pose and her apparent familiarity with the landscape suggest that she frequents this place regularly. But closer inspection reveals that the image is a collage, consisting of a lithograph (the landscape) and two colourised photographs [fig. 3]. Whereas the head is cut from a 'last sleep' portrait, the sitting body is a cut-out from a conventional studio portrait of a woman who is most probably alive. Even though it was a common practice to place the deceased in an upright position, in the majority of cases the corpse had to lean on a backrest, sometimes held by a belt at the chest, in order that

the corpse did not slump down or fall from the chair. Since the body in this example maintains a straight and stable posture without leaning on a back of a chair, we can assume that the cut-out of the body came from a portrait of a living woman.

Fig. 2: A. Poton, Portrait of a Woman in a Landscape, ca. 1852, collage of lithograph and hand-coloured salted paper print, 24 x 17 cm. Collection Lightmotif, Geneva.
© Collection Lightmotif

Fig. 3: A. Poton, Portrait of a Woman in a Landscape (detail of fig. 2), ca. 1852. Collection Lightmotif, Geneva. © Collection Lightmotif

Although the face is usually the centre of a portrait, in this particular image the upright body has more relevance because it transforms the image into an 'alive, yet dead' portrait. [24] The posture of the body, for example, signals that the woman is living, but her closed eyes suggest that she is not entirely present, which is rather unusual for traditional portraiture. Particularly because of the closed eyes, art historian Anton Pigler states that portraiture after death has limited artistic value as the sitter rejects the communication with the beholder.[25] British art historian Shearer West disagrees with this characterisation, and points to the individualised traits in the portrait of the dead in European funeral sculptures as well as painting and graphic arts since

the late Middle Ages.[26] Although closed eyes – a sign for the demise of the sitter – reject a relationship to the viewer, they do not make the posthumous portrait a misrepresentation. Far more crucial is that the photograph shows the deceased as she/he appeared during lifetime. As with a portrait of the living, the bereaved recognises the sitter by facial expression and her/his characteristic and individual pose.[27] Moreover, a portrait of the dead literally manifests the wish to overcome death. As West has stated, 'A portrait could bring the dead back to life and appear to provide both a trace of a body and a stimulus to memory.'[28] In this sense, the photographic portrait of the dead is crucial for Western memorial and material culture: it embodies the deceased person as a physical substitute.[29]

As shown in both examples, the photographers worked with the stylistic device of temporal shifts so that they could 'resurrect' the deceased in the image. The photographers also took advantage of the medium's strength, which consists in reproducing the exact facial features of the sitter as well as in preserving the traces of a past presence. In this sense French film critic and theorist André Bazin also noted that the 'practice of embalming the dead' is done to overcome time and hence the physical decay after death. 'Photography does not create eternity, as art does, it embalms time, rescuing it simply from its proper corruption'.[30]

‘PM or Not?’: The Reitmayer Case

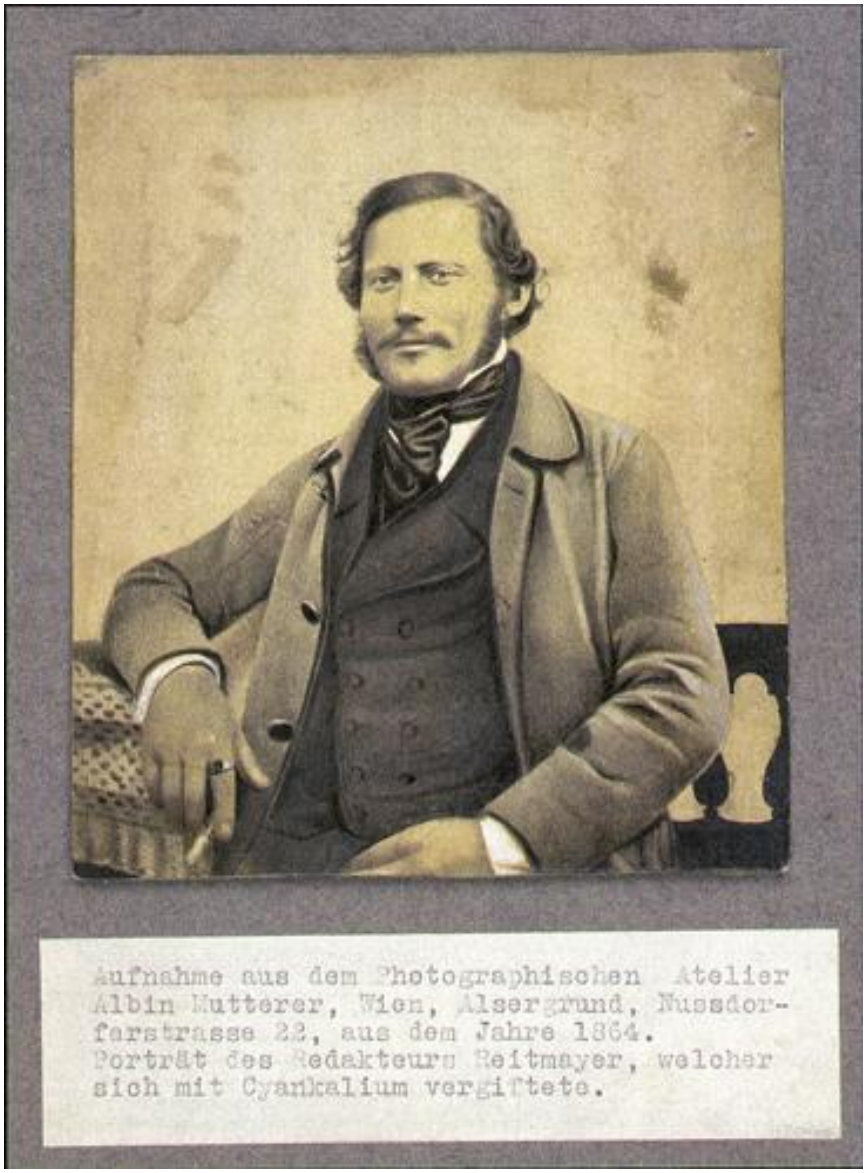

Fig. 4: Albin Mutterer, Portrait of the editor Reitmayer who poisoned himself with potassium cyanide, 1864, salted paper print with Indian ink and opaque white, 12.3 x 10.9 cm. © Albertina, Vienna – On permanent loan from the Höhere Graphische Bundes-, Lehr- und Versuchsanstalt, Vienna. www.albertina.at

This case study takes a closer look at a Viennese portrait which is nowadays considered an ‘alive, yet dead’ photograph.[31] The focus here is not on the identification of a type of picture. Instead it is a question of analysing ‘alive, yet dead’ photography from a new vantage point by taking a closer look at the

photograph itself. Moreover, the case study illustrates how categorising the 'alive, yet dead' portrait restricts our way of reading the image, which consequently leads to a decontextualisation of its original meaning and purpose.

In the field of posthumous photographic portraiture in German- and English-speaking areas, there is one photographer who stands out: Albin Mutterer (1806–1873), whose photographs of the deceased are now considered unique because of their extraordinary appearance.[32] Mutterer, originally from Bad Krozingen in the Black Forest, was a shoe-cream producer who moved to Vienna and opened a photo studio in 1848, where he practised until his death in 1873. He quickly became famous for portraying members of Viennese bourgeois society and taking pictures of the dead.[33]

One of the German photographer's most eccentric images is the half-figure salt print portrait of an editor named Reitmayer [fig. 4] – a portrait currently categorised in photography research as an 'alive, yet dead' photograph. The eccentricity is due to the odd appearance of the dead sitter, who seems vitally alive. With his right arm placed on a tablecloth next to him, Reitmayer holds a cigarette in his right hand between his forefinger and middle finger and looks straight ahead with an astute smile at the beholder. In the background on the right-hand side, one sees the outline of a balustrade, a standard component in Mutterer's studio photographs. The typewritten text below the photograph states that the photograph was shot in Albin Mutterer's photo studio in 1864. The text also specifies that it is the 'portrait of the editor Reitmayer, who

poisoned himself with potassium cyanide'.[34] Especially on the grounds of the typewritten document, photo historians assume that Reitmayer was dead at the time the image was taken. Art historian Felix Hoffmann, for instance, states that '[T]he caption on the front and on the back [reveals] that the editor Reitmayer photographed here poisoned himself before the image was taken'.[35] However, the explanatory note does not actually confirm that the sitter was dead. It seems that this way of reading gives primacy to the text in interpreting the photograph, thus reducing the photographic object to an illustration of this textual information. Of course, the assumption that it might be a post-mortem portrait is closely related to the fact that Albin Mutterer was well-known for taking pictures of the dead; nonetheless, this does not constitute a clear argument that Reitmayer's picture was taken after his death.[36]

A discrepancy of dates has further complicated the reception history of the portrait.[37] While the inscription on the front of the portrait bears the date 1864, the year stated on the back is 1846. Since Mutterer worked with daguerreotypes in the mid-1840s, it can be assumed that he did not make the salt print in 1846.[38] As for the year indicated on the front of the picture, the German art historian Katharina Sykora has suggested that it corresponds to the first Viennese photographic exhibition in 1864, organised by the Photographische Gesellschaft (Photographic Society in Vienna), in which Albin Mutterer participated.[39] In an article on the exhibition in the *Wiener Zeitung*, Mutterer is mentioned as the 'Leichenphotograph'[40] (photographer of corpses) who displayed 'several funeral monuments, corpses, the old

dissection room of the Allgemeine Krankenhaus, and appropriate pleasant objects'.[41]

According to Alfred Wolf, Mutterer promoted his artistic skill in taking pictures of the deceased as 'the dead retouched as alive'.[42] But the article from 1864 does not explicitly state that the photographer was famous for 'alive, yet dead' portraits. The catalogue of the exhibition only records that Mutterer showed a photograph of the deceased Karl II Borromäus Philipp Prince of Schwarzenberg. However, this image is most likely not an 'alive, yet dead' picture, as political figures were in those days traditionally photographed lying down and with their eyes closed. By looking at the listing of Mutterer's exhibits, it is striking that all salted paper and albumen prints have a specific title, but only one is listed as 'a portrait'.[43] Nevertheless, the question whether it is Reitmayer's 'alive, yet dead' portrait cannot be answered.

In order to achieve a more detailed reading of the Reitmayer portrait I suggest using the text as a secondary – and therefore the image as the primary – source. As previously mentioned, Mutterer was well known for his portraits of Vienna's affluent society. As a member of it, Reitmayer was among Mutterer's first customers; he photographed the editor early in his career in the 1840s [fig. 5]. The most interesting aspect of this portrait daguerreotype of Reitmayer is that it displays a striking resemblance to the alleged post-mortem image.

Fig. 5: Albin Mutterer, Portrait of the Editor Reitmayer, 1840s, daguerreotype, 8 x 6.5 cm.
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Even though the images are mirror-inverted, the similarities between the two portraits are remarkable. In the same manner as in the photograph of 1864, the young editor is turned slightly diagonally to the right, sitting next to a covered table with his top hat and with his left arm on it. In this picture, too, the editor holds a cigarillo between the forefinger and middle finger, but this

time he holds it with his left hand. In contrast to the later image, however, the portrayed person looks more tense when it comes to his posture and facial expression. But why did Mutterer photograph the editor in the same way after a twenty-year interval? If we assume that Reitmayer's portrait of 1864 was taken immediately after his suicide, one of the explanations could be that Mutterer used the earlier portrait of the editor as a reference to position Reitmayer's corpse. On the other hand, the portrait could have been taken during Reitmayer's lifetime and functioned as a mourning image. In fact, in the 1860s, it was common to use a portrait that was taken during one's life as a memorial image.[44]

As there is a lack of substantial facts regarding this, the image should be analysed in order to gain further information. When considering that a daguerreotype is in most cases a mirror-inverted picture, the resemblance is even more striking [fig. 6]. By flipping the older image horizontally and placing it as a transparent slide on the younger picture, it becomes evident, that the images are almost identical [fig. 7]: the nose, ears and parting of the hair lie on the exact same line.

Fig. 6: Albin Mutterer, left: Portrait daguerreotype of the editor Reitmayer flipped horizontally; right: Salt-print portrait of Reitmayer (detail of fig. 4). © Albertina, Vienna – On permanent loan from the Höhere Graphische Bundes-, Lehr- und Versuchsanstalt, Vienna. www.albertina.at

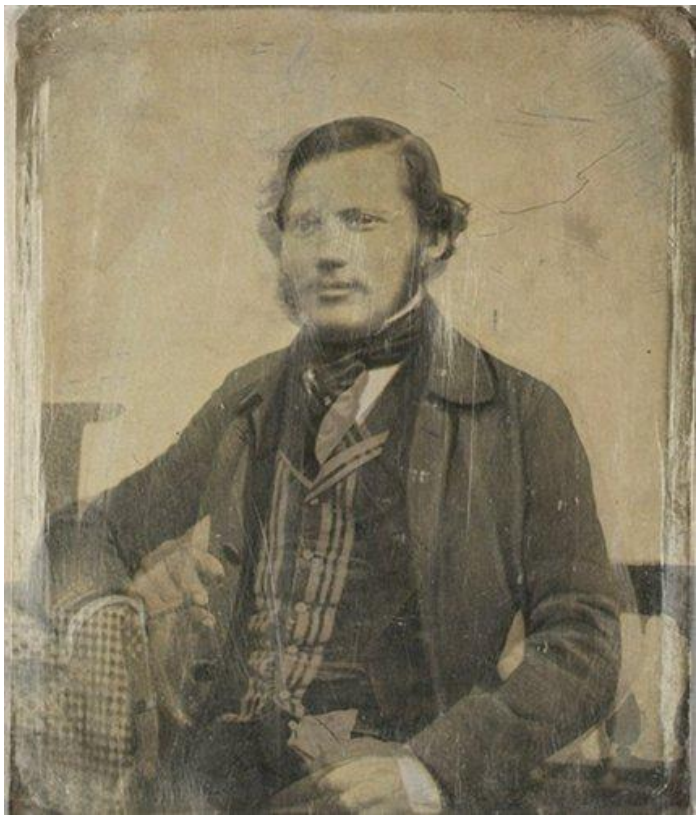

Fig. 7: By flipping the daguerreotype portrait horizontally and placing it as a transparent slide on the photograph of 1864, it becomes evident, that the images are almost identical.

The more recent image shows an older and burlier Reitmayer; however, the impression is deceiving: the salt print was excessively retouched with Indian ink and opaque white, visible most clearly in the distortion of perspective that is noticeable on the waistcoat and the proportions of the body, especially the irregular circumference of the arms. The intervention into the photograph is also shown by the hanging right hand and the loose position of the cigarette. Yet, with the exception of the position of the hanging hand, the pose is almost identical. Moreover, by manipulating the hand, Mutterer intended to obscure the newer image's similarity to the older one. It is due to these discrepancies that it can be assumed that Albin Mutterer first photographed the older image, then used the negative to make an enlarged print of only the head and shoulders, whereupon he finally drew in the body and the props onto the salt print. The 1864 photograph is a reprint of the earlier daguerreotype; the man in the portrait, previously assumed to be a corpse propped before the camera, is actually alive. Mutterer created a fictitious portrait that was retouched so heavily that the 1840s prototype could hardly be recognised. Moreover, he levelled the boundaries between artistic means and photographic material evidence, bringing the oscillation of fact and fiction onto an entirely different level. This interpretation could also solve the mystery of the date on the back of the photograph. '1846' could well be a typographical error. Alternatively, it could indicate the year of the portrait daguerreotype.

Was this photograph embedded in the context of mourning? Who commissioned this portrait? What was their intention? It is indisputable that

the portrait is a representation of a public figure who seems to have been an important customer of Albin Mutterer, since he made an elaborate salted paper print of the daguerreotype. But precisely on the grounds of these facts, the question arises whether Mutterer showed Reitmayer's portrait at the 1864 exhibition, while pointing out that the editor committed suicide. It is possible the note was an aide-mémoire for someone who wished to remember the sitter's identity and the tragic circumstances of his death.

Connecting with the tradition of 'alive, yet dead' photography, the portrait of Reitmayer is nowadays constructed around several ambivalent aspects. Although not explicitly stated, the dramatic text positions the subject within a mythical context. In this case, the myth is generated due to the lack of information on the specific context in which the image was taken.[45] Nevertheless, with this approach we lose sight of the actual subject of the research, i.e. the image itself.

Since Reitmayer's 1864 portrait is a reprint of the original daguerreotype, manipulated until it almost vanished, we can assume that he was not physically available when the image was made. In this sense, he may also be considered more absent than factually dead. On the other hand, he is also a revenant – a departed coming back into the everyday life of those he left behind. With this in mind, we must revise the categorisation of this image from an 'alive, yet dead' photograph to a portrait literally made posthumously. Mutterer's role also shifts within the Austrian history of photography from an

'alive, yet dead' portraitist to an innovative photographer who knew how to take advantage of the manipulative and creative capacities of the medium.[46]

In summary the case study about Reitmayer's portrait became an investigation of the technical and artistic skills of Albin Mutterer. Although the main question about the portrait's purpose remains open, Reitmayer's portrait is still embedded in the tradition of remembering the absent sitter.

Conclusion

The 'alive, yet dead' portraiture conceals the evident signs of mortality: death is obscured by manipulating the picture and by staging the body in a lifelike posture. This type of portrait photography plays with the perception of the beholder who is seeking evident traces even though they might be based on the grounds of ambiguous signs.

This paper suggested that an exploratory reading is probably the best approach to the ambivalent and uncertain qualities of 'alive, yet dead' portraits that act with the potentials and limitations of the photographic medium in the mid nineteenth century. My analysis focused on the manipulation of images and clarified the necessity to work closely with the material in order to focus on how the images basically functioned, especially because the photographic 'alive, yet dead' portrait operates with specific stylistic devices to affect our usual gaze patterns. Written statements of the nineteenth century also testified that the photographer had to create an illusionistic picture.

Nineteenth-century mourners rejected a picture that showed evidence of death – indeed, they literally requested to see an ambivalent body. The 'alive, yet dead' portrait sought to satisfy the desire of the bereaved to find solace in the serene traits of the sitter.

As the Whittaker and the Poton portraits showed, one of the most important strategies for the posthumous portrait was temporal displacement. While the American photographer used a simple technique by retouching the eyes of the deceased girl, Poton made a photographic collage of a living body and the head of a dead woman. Both images demonstrated that in reversing the temporal orders in the image the photographer could bring the dead back to life. Albin Mutterer's portrait of the editor Reitmayer demonstrated how the identity and function of a photographic portrait can be obscured by ambiguous written statements. In considering these facts, we have to examine the material source so that we can extract more information. My approach compared two portraits of Reitmayer made twenty years apart. In doing so, I was able to clarify that the 1864 photograph of the apparently deceased Reitmayer was a new print of an earlier portrait from the 1840s. The case study showed paradigmatically that classifying the portrait as posthumous misleads the reading of the image. Ultimately the image still remains embedded in the context of memorial culture. The question 'pm or not' is not relevant; instead, we should think about the 'alive, yet dead' photograph in its working process, which induces an uncertain, ambivalent legibility. Moreover, I wish to initiate a critical reflection on the category of the 'alive, yet dead' portrait: early post-mortem portraits should be viewed in a more differentiated

manner through re-reading and comprehending the complexity of their memorial functions and their material culture. A death portrait is not necessarily a portrait of a corpse; as the case studies demonstrated, it can be a far more complex, multilayered image which presents the deceased not only through an appearance of life and resemblance of the sitter but also through the material, haptic quality and photographic techniques.

Endnotes

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[1] See http://www.thanatos.net (accessed 7 July 2015).

[2] See Dan Meinwald, *Memento Mori: Death in Nineteenth Century Photography* (Riverside: California Museum of Photography, 1990); David Stannard, 'Sex, Death, and Daguerreotypes: Toward an Understanding of Image as Elegy', in John Wood (ed.), *America and the Daguerreotype* (Iowa City: University Press of Iowa, 1991): 73–108; Jay Ruby, *Secure the Shadow: Death and Photography in America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995); Geoffrey Batchen, *Forget Me Not: Photography and Remembrance* (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2004); Audrey Linkman, 'Taken from Life: Post-Mortem Portraiture in Britain 1860–1910', in *History of Photography* vol. 30, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 309–347; Katharina Sykora, *Die Tode der Fotografie: Totenfotografie und ihr sozialer Gebrauch*, vol. 1 (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2009).

[3] Mike Jacob, 'Part 2: Death and Photography in the Nineteenth Century', in *Photographica World* 79 (December 1996): 21–23.

[4] Ruby, *Secure the Shadow*: 52–103.
The terms 'last sleep' and 'alive, yet dead' were shaped by the American anthropologist Jay Ruby and are two of the three styles of representing the deceased in the nineteenth century. The third is 'funeral photography' that shows the dead person in a coffin, thus providing evidence of the death of the person by depicting the particular funeral or burial rite. Ibid.: 75–77.

[5] Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History; Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989): 19–20.

[6] Upon closer consideration of the term 'alive, yet dead', a certain element of ambiguity becomes evident. Hence, I also pursue the question of whether the term can be used as a generic term for the category 'last sleep'. The state of being alive is also shown in the depiction of sleep. Jay Ruby views both the 'last sleep' and 'alive, yet dead' as post-mortem photography. However, 'post-mortem photography' is problematic because it describes not a specific portrait but all death images, generally including pathological and crime photography. Furthermore, the genre 'post-mortem photography' needs to be reconsidered because the technical term has different meanings and therefore contributes to the confusion over the genre. Since this discussion would go beyond the scope of this paper, I will consider it for future research.

[7] Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart, *Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images* (London; New York: Routledge, 2004): 4.

[8] Ibid.: 3.

[9] Stannard, 'Sex, Death, and Daguerreotypes': 95–98.

[10] Anton Pigler, 'Portraying the Dead: Painting – Graphic Art', in Lajos Fülep (ed.), *Acta Historiae Artium. Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, vol. 4 (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1956): 1–75.

[11] See for example Heinz K. Henisch and Bridget A. Henisch, *The Painted Photograph, 1839–1914* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University

Press, 1996); Robin Jaffee Frank, *Love and Loss: American Portrait and Mourning Miniatures* (New Haven: Yale University Art Gallery, 2000): 276–303.

[12] John L. Gihon and Albert S. Southworth use the expressions 'natural position' and 'natural way' when referring to the importance of staging the deceased in a naturalistic, casual pose. John L. Gihon, 'Curious Photographic Experiences', in *The Philadelphia Photographer* vol. 8, no. 95 (November 1871): 351; Albert Sands Southworth in the panel discussion 'Posing, Lighting, and Expression', in *The Philadelphia Photographer* vol. 10, no. 117 (September 1873): 282.

[13] J. Hubert, 'Can Photography Lie?', in *The British Journal of Photography* vol. 34, no. 1393, Part 1 (14 January 1887): 23–24; J. Hubert, 'Can Photography Lie?', in *The British Journal of Photography* vol. 34, no. 1394, Part 2 (21 January 1887): 40.

[14] Sykora, *Die Tode*: 64–67.

[15] Anonymous, 'Life from the Dead', in *The Photographic and Fine Art Journal* vol. 8 (July 1855): 224.

[16] Quoted without citation of the source in Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography: From 1839 to the Present* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1982): 32.

[17] André-Adolphe-Eugène Disdéri, *Renseignements photographiques indispensables à tous* (Paris: Gaittet, 1855): 25.

[18] Ibid.: 25–26. 'Chaque fois que nous avons été appelé à faire un portrait après décès, nous avons vêtu le mort des habits qu'il portait habituellement. Nous avons recommandé qu'on lui laissât les yeux ouverts, nous l'avons assis près d'une table, et pour opérer, nous avons attendu sept ou huit heures. De cette façon nous avons pu saisir le moment ou [sic] les contractions de l'agonie disparaissant, il nous était donné de reproduire une apparence de vie. C'est le seul moyen d'obtenir un portrait convenable, et qui ne rappelle pas à la personne pour laquelle il est cher, le moment si douloureux qui lui a enlevé ce qu'elle aimait.' All translations are the author's own unless otherwise indicated.

[19] Nathan G. Burgess, 'Taking Portraits after Death', in *The Photographic and Fine Art Journal* vol. 8, no. 3 (March 1855): 80.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Linkman, 'Taken from Life': 322.

[22] Displaying the dead with open eyes and setting her/him in a lifelike pose was more popular in America and Continental Europe than in Great Britain. In Victorian Britain, the dead were not supposed to be touched on account of a superstitious belief that one could disturb the deceased and induce him/her to come back as a revenant. Whereas several articles in America explained how to set a corpse in an 'animated' pose, in Great Britain few articles about 'alive, yet dead' portraits were published. Sometimes American articles were reprinted with the intention to foster transatlantic exchange between specialists. See Linkman, 'Taken from Life': 310.

[23] Ibid.: 315.

[24] Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (London: Reaktion Books, 1991): 10.

[25] Pigler, 'Portraying the Dead': 2.

[26] Shearer West, *Portraiture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004): 64.

[27] Linkman, 'Taken from Life': 321–322.
[28] West, *Portraiture*: 65.
[29] Batchen, *Forget Me Not*: 14.
[30] André Bazin, 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', trans. Hugh Gray, in *Film Quarterly* vol. 13, no. 4 (Summer 1960): 4; 8.
[31] See Felix Hoffmann, 'Fotografie und Tod: Distributions- und Fetischisierungsformen der Leidenschaft – Kompensation einer Emotion', in Katharina Sykora, Ludger Derenthal and Esther Ruelfs (eds), *Fotografische Leidenschaften* (Marburg: Jonas Verlag, 2006): 87–100; Sykora, *Die Tode*: 109–115.
[32] Alfred Wolf, 'Albin und Josef Mutterer: Vater und Sohn als Wegbereiter der Photographie', in *Das Heimatmuseum Alsergrund* vol. 30, no. 121 (November 1989): 9. Albin Mutterer's year of birth is quoted differently in the research literature. While Austrian photo-historian Timm Starl (idem, *Lexikon zur Fotografie in Österreich 1839 bis 1945* [Vienna: Album Verlag, 2005]: 339) states that Mutterer was born in 1826, Alfred Wolf indicates the year 1806. However, the *Wiener Zeitung* reported on 8 July 1873 that Mutterer died at the age of 67 which confirms Wolf's assumption that Mutterer was born in 1806. 'Verstorbene', in *Wiener Zeitung* no. 157 (8 July 1873): 1240.
Regarding the extraordinary appearance of the images, see Henisch and Henisch, *Painted Photograph*: 193–194; 198; Hoffmann, 'Fotografie und Tod': 87–100; Sykora, *Die Tode*: 113–115; Audrey Linkman, *Photography and Death* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011): 29.
[33] Wolf, 'Albin und Josef Mutterer': 8–9; Starl, *Lexikon*: 339.
[34] 'Porträt des Redakteurs Reitmayer, welcher sich mit Cyancalium vergiftete'.
[35] '[D]ie vorder- und rückseitige Beschriftung [verrät], dass sich der hier fotografierte Redakteur Reitmayer vor der Aufnahme mit Zyankali vergiftet hatte.' Hoffmann, 'Fotografie und Tod': 91. Also Katharina Sykora presumes from the caption that the photograph was taken immediately after his suicide. Sykora, *Die Tode*: 113. Moreover, art historian Steffen Siegel deduces from his analysis that Reitmayer had committed suicide the day before the image was taken. Steffen Siegel, 'Das Porträt des Redakteurs Reitmayer' (review for Katharina Sykora's book *Die Tode der Fotografie*), in: http://www.taz.de/1/archiv/digitaz/artikel/?ressort=ku&dig=2010%2F02%2F02%2Fa0033&cHash=fdf8670edc (accessed 22 May 2015).
[36] Wolf, 'Albin und Josef Mutterer': 9; Heinz Riedel, '"Tote retuschiert wie lebend": Albin Mutterer, der Leichenporträtist vom Thury-Grund', in *Wiener Geschichtsblätter* vol. 51, no. 2 (1996): 115–118.
[37] Sykora, *Die Tode*: 550.
[38] Wolf, 'Albin und Josef Mutterer': 7; Starl, *Lexikon*: 339.
[39] Sykora, *Die Tode*: 550. The Photographische Gesellschaft was founded in 1861 as the first German-language photographic society. Albin Mutterer was a member since the beginning.
[40] Anonymous, 'Die photographische Ausstellung', in *Wiener Zeitung* no. 118 (25 May 1864): 475.
[41] Ibid. 'Mutterer [zeigte] eine Anzahl von Grabmonumenten, Leichen, die alte Secierkammer des allgemeinen Krankenhauses und entsprechende freundliche Gegenstände'.

[42] Unfortunately Wolf does not indicate the source of Mutterer's slogan. Wolf, 'Albin und Josef Mutterer': 9; 11.
[43] Die photographische Gesellschaft, *Erste photographische Ausstellung in Wien* (Vienna: Selbstverlag der photographischen Gesellschaft, 1864): 26.
[44] See for example Batchen, *Forget Me Not*.
[45] Unfortunately, there is no further information on Reitmayer's identity. During my research, the main difficulty in obtaining more information was the missing information about Reitmayer's first name. I have established that he is not listed in the first address book for Vienna, Adolph Lehmann's *Allgemeiner Wohnungsanzeiger*. The book registered a person's last name as well as his occupation, and there is no record of an editor named Reitmayer. At this point, two explanations can be considered: either Reitmayer was not from Vienna, or he died before 1859, the year Lehmann's address book was founded. Research of the Viennese obituary columns also did not bring any results. See Lehmann's *Allgemeiner Wohnungsanzeiger*: http://www.digital.wienbibliothek.at/nav/classification/2609 (accessed 7 January 2015). Alternative spellings of the family name were also considered and not found.
See also the obituary website Familia Austria, http://www.familia-austria.at/wienerzeitung/wz_daten.php (accessed 7 January 2015).
[46] Within research literature, Albin Mutterer is famous for his coloured and retouched photographs, but not for the print processes used in Reitmayer's portrait. Robert Zahlbrecht, *Die historischen Sammlungen der Graphischen Lehr- und Versuchsanstalt* (Vienna: Graphische Lehr- und Versuchsanstalt, 1963): 14; Wolf, 'Albin und Josef Mutterer': 8–9; Henisch and Henisch, *Painted Photograph*: 193–194; Starl, *Lexikon*: 339.

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